

URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD

A RICH, REDEEMPTIVE JOURNEY

INTERVIEW BY JILL VINEY

URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD'S ROUGH-HEWN sculptures are blunted and brooding forms. Their hacked and furrowed surfaces, their somber colors and looming shapes, suggest a history of violence and trauma. Her sculptures have tremendous physical impact—their forms evoke such potent images they almost become icons. Yet despite their strong presence, they have a haunting insubstantiality. Human silhouettes, carved shadowlike into the works' surfaces, steal like afterimages or ghosts across the richly textured surfaces.

Von Rydingsvard was born to Polish parents in Germany during World War II. Before moving to the United States at the age of nine, she and her family lived in forced-labor and refugee camps in Germany, where sacrifice and deprivation were constants. According to the artist, the impressions made during this period recur in her work again and again. The rough wood of the barracks, the dark wool felt of the government-issue blankets, the somber grays and browns of the countryside, have all found their way into her sculpture, as have shapes reminiscent of simple tools, weathered barns, coffins, altars and graves. Her works are at once figurative and architectural, sheltering and exposed.

Yet despite the reference to pain and deprivation, von Rydingsvard's work also carries a message of redemption and catharsis. Her sculptures are "hymns of survival."¹ They speak of pain conquered by persistence, of violence and trauma overcome by stoicism and pride. Her works have been described as "haunting rather than despairing, stoic rather than sentimental."² According to the artist, "One of the things I would be most ashamed of is to have any pathos in my work. Or blatant pain . . . I want this kind of packed pride, this containment of emotions—like Giotto."³

It is, in part, this duality of pain and triumph that has garnered much critical acclaim for the artist over the past dozen years. Von Rydingsvard began sculpting seriously in the early '70s, when the Minimalists were still dominating the art world. Although she admired their work for its purity and control, she wanted to make sculpture that was more subjective and "carnal." "My use of forms," she says, "is intuitive, and has to do with my personal history."

In 1975 von Rydingsvard graduated from Columbia University in New York with a master of fine arts. Since then she has received

Ursula von Rydingsvard's rough-hewn forms reflect a violent and traumatic past, yet they refuse to indulge in pathos.



Ursula von Rydingsvard in her Brooklyn studio. Photo: Allen Rokach.

numerous awards, including two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Fulbright-Hays Travel Grant. Her work has been included in group shows at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, the Queens Museum, and the Corcoran, among other prestigious institutions, and she has had 14 solo shows, including ones at Bette Stoler and Rosa Esman, and a well-publicized exhibition at Exit Art in the spring of 1988. Her sculpture is currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and, starting December 14, can be seen at the Philip Morris branch of the Whitney. She is also working on outdoor installations for the Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis and the Walker Art Center in



Above: Von Rydingsvard's *Umarles (You Went and Died)*, 1987-88, deals with issues relating to her father's death. The piece was first seen at Exit Art and was later purchased by The Brooklyn Museum, where it was displayed earlier this year. Photo: David Alison, courtesy the artist.



Below: *Zakopane*, 1987, was one of the works shown at Exit Art in 1988. According to the artist, the piece has associations with churches in German refugee camps, where as a child she daily watched rows of women, their heads covered in kerchiefs, chanting prayers for forgiveness in Latin. Photo: Marbeth, courtesy the artist.

Minneapolis. A solo show of her work will open next spring at Lorence-Monk Gallery in New York City, and she will be part of a survey show of "Art Since 1945" at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., in 1991.

What is the strongest impulse for your sculpture? Your early childhood as a Polish refugee in Germany during the end of World War II?

Things I feel instinctively from my past do affect my work. In early pieces I was drawn to felt because we used to put army blankets against wooden barrack walls to keep warm. And I remember objects in our home, like wooden tubs which we filled with water in



Ursie A's Dream, 1988, grew out of a dream related to von Rydingsvard by her daughter. The work was originally installed under the auspices of Santa Barbara's Contemporary Arts Forum inside a World War II bunker wedged in a cliff hundreds of feet above the Pacific Ocean. The piece is currently on view at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center and will travel to the Philip Morris branch of the Whitney in December. Collection of Ed Downe, New York City. Photo: David Alison, courtesy the artist.

order to float butter and keep it cool, and grey linen cloth laid in the grass, sprinkled with water and bleached by the sun to remove its itchiness.

I'm also influenced by sentiments that come from further back in my ancestry: I feel connected to the early farmers who worked the land of Poland and Russia, to the tools that were made and to the impulses of early mankind.

However, memory connects to my work most immediately through dreams. It's not as though I make anything I dream—it's not that direct. But every morning for years I've written down my dreams in a notebook as a way of holding the thoughts that go through my head.

I find references to architecture, landscape and body spaces in your work.

In coming to the United States, I was amazed by how much earth was covered by concrete and geometric structures. It was difficult for me to understand living in hard brick houses, but easy to understand relationships with the earth.

I like architecture without architects, structures that are not figured out abstractly before they are built. I have a great admiration for architecture that seems to grow up out of the landscape in which it finds itself, with roofs and windows of just the right scale—like Swedish fishing villages.

I also respond to architecture made by animals in nature—concave, gentle shapes left behind from animals lying in the earth or grass.

Your sculpture *Zakopane* has received a lot of attention. How did it develop?

The piece has many associations. The word *zakopane* means to bury something in such a way that it can never be found. It's a word that's connected with earth and shovels—simple tools I feel a strong



Von Rydingsvard's *Untitled (Seven Mountains)*, 1987-88, was purchased in 1988 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it is currently on view. According to the artist, its forms are highly interdependent: "there's a wonderful 'joinery' . . . to the pieces—they seem to greet each other." Photo: David Alison, courtesy the artist.

affinity towards because my ancestors were peasant farmers who used them for their livelihood. The word also refers to a small mountain range and town in southeast Poland where there were small farmlands bordered by hills and crevasses one could walk though. It was a landscape taken in easily, not awesome and huge. You could keep track of your height and all you saw around you, both visually and psychologically. My sculpture *Zakopane* relates to this scale; it isn't overpowering or aggressive; it supports your own size and psyche. The piece also evokes for me images of religion. Church was a very influential part of my life when I lived in the

refugee camps. Everyone went to church daily, and two times on Sunday. The sculpture has some connection to this, to the rows of fanatical women whom I would see every day in the churches—which were often just barracks with crosses—sitting in the front pew, kerchiefs on their heads, chanting prayers for forgiveness.

Zakopane started on the floor with a surrounding fence-like structure. After many changes, I put it on the wall and found it needed upper wooden appendages to answer the lower pod-like sacs. It took tremendous labor to make a sculpture 22 feet long, so I took the form to Baltimore's Maryland Institute, College of Art, where students helped repeat sections.

Recently you made small sculptures that hang on the wall. What was the influence behind these works?

I remember my father's tools hanging on the wall of a shed. But my pieces end up being closer to icons than tools. In the relationship between the first people and the tools they made, the tools were the means to a very important goal. It's as though one were taking an emotional road toward those tools, not just looking at the tools themselves—a kind of slow evolution when things were built out of the needs of people who were going to use them.

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You began to work in the '70s. How did that affect your work?

In the '70s the Minimalists seemed like kings—so in control, and with this powerful way of looking at things. It is one of the only times I felt there was a clear road between answers and forms. They reached for a kind of perfection that rebuffed the emotional content of my being. I was in awe of these Daddys who figured out such a clean mold. Their systems were too dry, hard-edged, and finally, predictable. One could plug into the philosophy but not stay with the work visually. The repetition of meat shanks on a rack means more to me. For me, the visual end must keep perking.

What art inspires you?

The figures of Giotto and Greek sculpture in the 6th century B.C. In 1982 I spent several weeks in Italy. Giotto's way of speaking is so powerful, so moving. The way he wraps his bodies and contains his heads and hands creates a deep sense of drama. There is also a sculpture of Aphrodite in the Metropolitan Museum. She has a flowing robe in back that feels like a rectangular fluted column. In front, however, the robe clings more sensuously with a seemingly weightless and transparent cloth.

Your early sculpture was outdoors and site-specific, while last spring you showed work in a New York gallery. How do the two compare?

Outdoors one must make forms that are bulkier, more hearty and



The hollow, bowl-like forms of this untitled sculpture reflect the artist's affection for rugged, erratic surfaces and primitive forms "reduced to their simplest core." The 1989 piece will be exhibited for the first time next spring at Lorence-Monk Gallery. Photo: David Allison, courtesy Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York City.

durable. It's harder to be assertive with the sun and sky—you have the whole land to react to. Indoors, the details produced by staining colors and making fine markings on the wood are more visible. I can make chip marks, hair-fine tips and joints that append themselves to the wall. I can relate pieces in scale and materials differently to the psyche of the viewer, and I can get more intimate with the more vulnerable surfaces.

I use four-by-four cedar beams in all my work because it enables me to create anew the rule by which I want to go back to nature. There are surfaces I have that connect themselves to organic things, the essence of nature. I use a natural substance that is soft and receptive to digging and grinding. In my own way, I rub shoulders with nature in making my work. There's a connection between the feet of a piece and the root system. My pieces are not nature but make reference to it—a tension between what evolved from nature and what didn't. If I started with a log, nature would have already dictated a lot of the form. Cedar feels very seductive to me because it's very responsive to what I do with it and has no grain or eye-ball knots.

How has your work changed since 1975?

I feel it has become more and more alive. The work seems to have less of a need to shield itself as tightly from the world. It is more generous in its capacity to share emotionally with the world.

One thing about my work is that I am constantly trying to understand my experiences in it. Experiences can haunt you; they have a power, and so you return to them, take control, and make a piece about it. I don't want to give people something sensational in my work. I want to give them something solid they can fuse with and take away with them. □

Notes

- 1.) Avis Berman, "Ursula von Rydingsvard: Life Under Siege," *ARTnews*, Dec. 1988, p. 98.
- 2.) *ibid.*, p. 97.
- 3.) *ibid.*

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